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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001752

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: MINORITIES BOARD REVIEWING APPOINTMENT OF  
NON-TURKS TO ORTHODOX CHURCH'S HOLY SYNOD

REF: ISTANBUL 381

(U) Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (U) Summary: Caught off-guard by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's appointment of six non-Turkish citizens to his Holy Synod, Turkish officials are not certain how to react, but say GOT is reviewing the move. Part of the difficulty the authorities face is that Bartholomew's move exposes the law of rule vice rule of law approach the Turkish State has used since 1923 to keep the Ecumenical Patriarchate boxed in: there is no Turkish law governing the Synod and the State has relied on decrees from the Istanbul governorate and enforcement by a heretofore secret watchdog subcommittee. End summary.

2. (U) Nezih Dogan, Interior Ministry SecGen, told us March 19 the GOT is awaiting a report from a newly formed minorities board before responding to the pathbreaking decision of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I to appoint six non-Turkish citizens to the Orthodox church's Holy Synod (reftel).

3. (U) The GOT in January abolished the Minorities Subcommittee, established by secret regulation in 1962 to monitor minorities as potential threats to the Turkish State, and replaced it with the Board to Assess Problems of Minorities (the new Board regulation was also secret, though it was leaked to the press). The former Subcommittee included representatives from the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, the Turkish General Staff, and the National Security Council, among other government agencies. The military and intelligence agencies were excluded from the new Board, which includes representatives from MFA, the Education Ministry, the Interior Ministry, and the State Ministry overseeing the Directorate General of Foundations. Dogan said the GOT has been slow to respond to the Synod issue because it is still in the process of establishing the new Board. Nevertheless, Board members met for the first time the week of March 8 for the express purpose of reviewing the Synod issue. At the meeting, various members were tasked with specific areas of research.

4. (U) Dogan averred that the Board considers the matter urgent, and will move "as quickly as possible," though it is unlikely to take action before the March 28 local elections. The Board will review Turkish law, the Lausanne Treaty and its deliberations, and international law. If the Board determines that the law either prohibits or protects the Patriarch's actions, it will render a final decision. Otherwise, it will submit a recommendation to relevant Cabinet officials for a political decision. Dogan asserted the standard line that Turkey, since Ottoman times, has always been tolerant of different religions. He said the GOT will be as flexible as possible under the law, but cannot accept a "fait accompli" from the Patriarch: "We will see if this is being done with good will, or if there is another intention behind it."

5. (U) Mustafa Yurdakul, first secretary in the MFA Department of Greek Affairs, told us the Board will not find a solution in the law. He said there is no law governing the Synod, and that even the edicts from the Istanbul Governor's Office requiring that the Patriarch be a Turkish citizen and setting rules for Patriarchal succession do not establish clear citizenship requirements for the Synod. Nevertheless, until now the Patriarch had appointed only Turkish citizens, and the GOT will have to adopt a policy regarding this unprecedented situation. While making their decision, Yurdakul averred, GOT officials will have to consider the implications for Turkey's EU-related reform efforts.

6. (C) Comment: The appointment of six non-Turkish citizens

to the Synod is a bid to keep the Ecumenical Patriarchate alive and viable in Istanbul as much in a physical sense as in the fact that the Patriarchate represents something beyond time. The appointments represent absolutely no threat to Turkey's interests; indeed, by strengthening the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Turkey enhances its position. However, reflecting the culture of suspicion lying behind Interior Ministry SecGen Dogan's words, elements of the Turkish Kemalist (secularist-nationalist) Establishment as well as the coalescing Islam-oriented Establishment remain incapable of seeing the benefits to Turkey.

17. (C) Comment, contd.: In this latter regard, there are two broader points. First, the cost to Turkey from the secular and Islam-oriented Establishments' paranoia and lack of normal analytic abilities. This mentality, combined with the two Establishments' continuing refusal to acknowledge both the Patriarchate's ecumenical essence and the inestimable value of maintaining the Patriarchate in Istanbul rather than having the Russian Orthodox Church gain the paramount status it and the Russian State have sought for centuries reflect both Kemalism's and the Islam-oriented Establishment's retrograde and inward-looking definition of state interests. Second, this paranoia is another measure of how far Turkey still must go before it understands and practices true religious tolerance.

EDELMAN